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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 000575

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SUBJECT: VIEWS ON THE NIGER DELTA, FROM THE NIGER DELTA;  
AMBASSADOR TRAVELS TO PORT HARCOURT

REF: LAGOS 563

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell per 1.4 b and d

1. (SBU) Summary: During Ambassador Campbell's April 5-7 visit to Port Harcourt, Nigerian interlocutors identified poverty and corruption as their chief concerns. American citizens working in the area cited the absence of law and order as their biggest worry. Contacts said working in the Delta is akin to operating in a "criminal environment." Our interlocutors maintained that ethnic conflict and militia violence could be reined in by the GON if it had sufficient political will. Responses to the Ambassador's questions concerning the way forward ranged from the specific -- implement the Niger Delta Development Commission's master plan, to the sweeping -- transform Nigerian values from the bottom-up. Interlocutors concurred electoral reform was integral to bringing accountable governance to the Niger Delta region. End Summary.

2. (U) During his visit, Ambassador met separately with Rivers State Governor Peter Odili, SPDC Managing Director Basil Oyimi, the Anglican and Catholic archbishops, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) staff, and University of Port Harcourt personnel. He also hosted a town hall for American Citizens, a civil society roundtable, a dinner for representatives of American oil service and maritime companies, and a dinner with civil society and governmental guests. This cable summarizes the majority of those meetings. See septels where noted.

Nigerians: Poverty and Corruption Root of the Problem  
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3. (C) The Anglican and Catholic Archbishops serving the Niger Delta told Ambassador that poverty most troubled their parishioners. Both religious leaders stated they provide food, income-generating activities, and shelter to many in their folds, which total well over one million individuals. Neither bishop blamed government or the oil companies for the impoverishment many of their parishioners face. The Anglican archbishop even praised usually reviled Rivers Governor Peter Odili, pronouncing him a "good man."

4. (C) Shell Petroleum and Development Corporation (SPDC) Managing Director (MD) Basil Oyimi told Ambassador eradicating corruption is the key to redressing the Niger Delta crisis. Oyimi stated there were few ideological girds to the crisis. It's simple, people want good schools, clean water, and jobs. Unfortunately, the only current way to attain those basic services is through political patronage. If you redress corruption and distribute resources fairly, the Niger Delta problem will resolve itself, he said (reftel).

5. (C) Human rights activist, Patrick Naagbanton, told Ambassador corruption is at the core of Nigeria's problems and Niger Delta Governors Odili of Rivers State and Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa State are its master craftsmen. As a result, electoral government has translated into few tangible gains for the populace. Naagbanton and other civil society actors affirmed that many are beginning to view life under the former military regime nostalgically, with some plaintively asserting, "Life was better under Abacha."

Americans: Niger Delta Poses Criminal Operating Environment  
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6. (C) American citizens told Ambassador their chief concern is law and order. Though the city had not seen significant violence since the major flare-up in Fall 2004, American citizens reported tensions remain elevated. In addition to daily concerns about potential violence, oil service company representatives told Ambassador they operate in a "criminal environment." Shake-downs are quotidian and cut into already narrow profit margins, they maintained (septel).

7. (C) Rivers State Officials and the NDDC Managing Director claimed separately that Port Harcourt "has no security problems." As proof, they asserted residents circulate freely, frequenting nightclubs and restaurants at all hours. If there were a security problem the streets

would be empty at night, they contended.

#### Ethnic Conflict and Militia Gangs: What Politics Created, Politics Can Undo

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18. (C) Interlocutors concurred that, to a large degree, politicians had engineered ethnic conflict and militia gangs in the Niger Delta. Michael Karipko, an environmental rights activist, said leaders politicize ethnic tensions when it suits them. Corking these tensions was challenging, but not impossible, he stated. Similarly militias had been created by politicians to "carry" the 2003 elections. A democracy activist told Ambassador, if militias are disarmed now, there will be no violence in the 2007 elections. He mused, "these kids won't spontaneously pick up arms to fight for a candidate because they are so enamored with his political platform." The consensus among contacts was "what politics can do, politics can undo."

19. (C) Pressed by Ambassador whether the GON is capable of arresting the now well-armed militia groups, SPDC MD Oyimi replied affirmatively. Militias, he said, could out-gun the Nigerian military only as long as the GON "dealt with them with kid gloves." Oyimi said a high-ranking Air Force officer assured him the militias posed no contest if the GON decided to "take them out." However, for now, the GON is exercising caution to avoid collateral damage. Oyimi emphasized it was not necessary to counter these groups with military force. "All these militias are for hire. Look at (Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force leader) Asari. He's quiet now, because he's been paid."

#### The Way Forward: Plethora of Ideas

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10. (C) Civil society roundtable participants offered a range of views on what should be done to improve the Niger Delta. Ediri Iruagua, who coordinates an entrepreneurial program for youth in Rivers State, told Ambassador the Niger Delta Development Commission's (NDDC) 15-year master plan is a solid economic development strategy. If implemented it would herald concrete improvements in the region, Iruagua stated. Civil society and international partners should focus on ensuring the plan's execution, he added. Other participants argued removing the plutocracy and bringing in a new generation of politicians was sine qua non to change. Egondo Esinwoke, who works at the grass-roots level on conflict resolution, stated the Nigerian people need to be "transformed." Starting from the bottom-up, they need to be educated as to their civic rights and duties under a democracy.

#### Electoral Reform Needed Sooner Rather Than Later

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11. (C) Contacts concurred electoral reform was critical to make the 2007 elections more credible than the 2003 mishap. Civil society contacts said confidence in the democratic process is lower in the Delta region than most of Nigeria given the widespread rigging which took place there not only in 2003, but also in subsequent local level elections. Dr. Adefemi Isumonah, a research fellow at respected Port Harcourt think-tank the Center for Advanced Social Science (CASS), told Ambassador civil society needs help pressuring political leaders in the run-up to 2007. Others must join the effort, he said. The National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) presented an opportunity to create the necessary structures for credible elections in 2007, Isumonah asserted.

12. (C) Rivers State Governor Peter Odili (and possible vice-presidential candidate) voiced tempered support for electoral reform. It was important that "lapses" from 2003 be corrected, Odili said. Odili agreed with Ambassador that domestic election monitors offered some advantages to foreign observers. The governor stipulated, however, that domestic watchers must not harbor "political agendas" (septel). Separately, Rivers State Commissioner of Information Magnus Abbe told Ambassador he supports the idea being bandied in the NPRC of six-year, one-term limits for officeholders. Speaking off the record, he said term limits were the only throttle to graft and corruption. Freedom from re-election worries would allow politicians to focus more on governance and less on building their warchests, he maintained.

#### Comment

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13. (C) For most residents in the Delta region, poverty compounded and partially caused by corruption, appears to be the most gnawing problem. Making government and government resources work for them is what they want. As one interlocutor suggested, the NDDC may have a major role to play and we will be taking a hard look at the agency and its

master plan to see if it can contribute to the region's development and stability.

¶14. (C) Comment Cont'd: Corruption of the electoral process is another major vice. However, many politicians are in office because they mastered this game and they do not appear to be on the road to penitence. Civil society representatives observe, and we concur, that the window in which to enact meaningful electoral reform is rapidly closing. However, they don't seem to be mobilizing in any meaningful way to pressure the government to cure the electoral system.

¶15. (C) Comment Cont'd: Last, it was beneficial to visit Port Harcourt to spend time with the American community there and hear their security concerns. We will maintain close contact with our citizens there and continue to provide the services and information they need to manage the risks of working in the important but tough Niger Delta.

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